

The sloped roofs over the main entrance to John J. Flynn Elementary were designed to blend into the school's surrounding neighborhood.



Flynn Elementary replaced the aging Boyd School, at right, which no longer met the school district's needs for space or function.

John J. Flynn Elementary

School design creates warm, inviting environment for students and staff

by Bob Brown

The staff at Boyd School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, long had held the dream of a new school to replace their 85-year-old building. While they expressed an abiding love for the tradition of their long-time home, they wished for the educational environment they saw in newer schools all around them.

Boyd School was an elementary school with virtually no storage space, so supplies were crammed into a tiny basement room tucked behind the boiler, or in hallways. Partially completed student art projects also sat along the walls on hallway floors. The building lacked adequate classroom space, forcing the staff to hold some classes on stairways and in closets. The library was tiny and couldn't offer an appropriate array of educational materials.

The three-story building had one set of bathrooms, in the basement. And it wasn't handicapped accessible, so children with physical disabilities had to be bused to schools in other parts of the city. The school's gymnasium was small, and students playing there had to avoid running into massive columns in the middle of the space. And as for a playground, well, Boyd School didn't really have one – just a small patch of blacktop area surrounding the building.

School district voters brought their dream of a new facility to the brink of fruition in April 1999 by passing a \$43 million referendum, of which \$6 million was for a replacement for Boyd School. The school district then hired Ayres Associates to design the kindergarten-through-fifth-grade facility.

When the new school, named John J. Flynn Elementary in memory of popular longtime school board president John Flynn, opens its doors this September, students and staff will find their most fervent wishes fulfilled. "They did a very nice job," Jerry Strader, facilities planner for the Eau Claire Area School District, said of the work of Ayres Associates. "I think there are a lot of things that are very nice about this school. I like the basic design, the color selection, just the whole feel of it. It doesn't feel like a large building when you're inside. It's very compact, which it had to be with the site limitations."

Even before the 1999 referendum was approved, Ayres Associates was hired by the school board to help plan for the new school. The initial challenge was finding a suitable site in a neighborhood with few open tracts of land. Ayres Associates project architect Raivo Balciunas prepared a report evaluating three possible sites for the new school. The report recommended a site that included an existing city park, which ultimately became the building site.

Once the site was chosen and the referendum approved, it was up to Ayres Associates to design a building to meet the needs of the school's staff. Balciunas spent several days meeting with the school



Small break-out rooms connect each pair of classrooms, providing a place where teachers can meet with small groups of children.



Sliding doors, at far right, can be opened to connect the school's cafeteria with the gymnasium.



Skylights in the music room, in the central core of the building, exemplify a way in which natural lighting is used throughout the school.



The school library, in the above three photos, is centrally located just past the main lobby, a design intended to show the emphasis school staff places on literacy. High ceilings and natural light from windows and skylights were included in the design to emphasize the library's significance.



Entrances to the principal and secretary's offices are just to the right of the main lobby, allowing staff to monitor access to the school and provide a warm welcome to students and visitors.

district administration and Boyd School staff to fully understand their wants and needs. Recalling the staff's reaction when Balciunas unveiled the plan, Principal Kim Hill said, "We were absolutely amazed at how well Ayres Associates had listened to us and translated our wishes into something that just had everything we had talked about."

Perhaps the most striking feature of the school's design is the main entrance lobby. A 20-foot-high ceiling allows upper windows to bathe the space with soft natural light. The focal point of the lobby is a bank of 10-foot-high windows offering a view into the library and computer lab beyond. The library is equally dramatic, with more high ceilings and natural light. Hill said the focus on the library sets the proper tone for the school. "We wanted the library to be front and center so there would be no doubt what our top priority is – literacy," she said.

Just to the right of the main entrance are the offices of the school secretary and principal. From here, staff can easily monitor access to the school and provide a warm welcome to students and visitors. In addition to the library and computer lab, the conveniently located central core of the building includes a music room, an art room complete with kiln, and several smaller rooms for special programs. Surrounding the central core are 10 classrooms and a large multi-purpose room along the north and south sides of the building. Initially the school district planned to house two sections each of grades one through five in these rooms, but already the flexibility of the design is paying dividends, Strader said. A temporary wall will divide the multipurpose room into two additional classrooms needed to handle a projected increase in the student population. If the population declines in future years, the room

can easily be restored to its original size. Small break-out rooms connect each pair of classrooms in Flynn Elementary, providing a place where teachers can meet with small groups of students while still monitoring their regular classrooms.

Kindergarten and early childhood classes will be housed in a separate wing near the main entrance to the school. This area includes access to a playground designed specifically for these younger students. Kindergartners can be loud and messy with their activities, so this design will allow them to have fun while not disturbing the rest of the school, Balciunas said.

The cafeteria and gymnasium are adjacent to each other at the rear of the building. The wall between the two can be opened, allowing the lunchroom to serve as a stage from which special performances can be presented to audiences seated in the gymnasium. Although the site was limited in area, the compact building design allowed for soccer and softball fields, a basketball court, and a playground area. The resulting green space is actually larger than the original city park and preserves views and access for neighborhood residents. The school is designed to allow easy access from the parking lot to athletic fields, the gymnasium, and cafeteria while allowing the rest of the building to be securely locked after school.

The many windows in the design flood Flynn Elementary in natural light. In addition to being pleasant, such profusion of natural light has been shown to improve academic performance and student behavior. It also lessens the need for artificial light, reducing electrical and air conditioning costs.

With sloped roofs over the main entrance, the school blended more into the surrounding neighborhood. "It looks friendly and inviting – not like an institution," Balciunas said. The stone work on the school

facade is a nod to the elaborate stone and terra cotta found on the school it replaced. The school's art teacher, Mary Sauter, designed a stone medallion that was installed over the main entrance to the new building. "It really gave the faculty an extra level of personal ownership in the design of the school," Balciunas said.



Flynn Elementary "is a little bit more appealing than some of our earlier buildings," Strader said. "We gave Ayres Associates a little more room to express some architectural detailing in this building."

Balciunas said he enjoys designing schools. "It's really satisfying to know that what you're doing makes a difference, to know what you're designing is really going to be the heart of a community and positively affect children's lives for generations to come," he said.

And Hill said she hopes generations to come will appreciate the attention to detail that went into the new school. "We know we provided a high quality education at Boyd School, but we're excited about the potential for even greater things at our new school." ■

John Flynn served on the Eau Claire school board for 23 years, from 1975 to 1998. He was president for 14 of those years. His value to the school district prompted the school board in July 2000 to name the replacement for Boyd Elementary after the longtime school board member. He died in August 2000 at the age of 61 after a long battle with cancer. The passage of a \$28 million school referendum in 1992 was among his proudest accomplishments during his tenure as a board member. That referendum led to the building of Northstar Middle School, and Lakeshore and Northwoods elementary schools.



When sliding doors connecting the cafeteria and gymnasium are open, the cafeteria can be used as a stage for special performances presented to audiences seated in the gymnasium.